

In 2014, one of Gabon's most powerful ministers, Jean Ping, emerged as a serious challenger to President Ali Bongo. In February, Ping announced he was severing all ties with the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), and by July he had aligned himself with the newly formed United Opposition Front for Change (FOPA). FOPA members include many former stalwarts of former president El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba, Ali Bongo's father.

On December 20, at least one man was killed and roughly one hundred arrested in the capital, Libreville, when police clashed with protesters to shut down a banned rally calling for the president's resignation amid growing popular discontent with the stagnant political landscape.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 9 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12

The bicameral parliament of Gabon consists of a National Assembly whose 120 members are elected by popular vote for five-year terms, and a 102-seat Senate indirectly elected by regional and municipal officials for six-year terms. Presidential term limits were abolished in 2003, and the president, who is elected by popular vote for seven years, has the power to dissolve the National Assembly. In snap presidential elections following former President Omar Bongo's death in 2009, Ali Bongo was elected with 42 percent of the vote against several senior PDG figures, who ran as independents. Although the opposition challenged the official results amid violent protests, the Constitutional Court upheld Bongo's victory following a recount the next month.

Some opposition parties boycotted the 2011 National Assembly elections over the government's failure to implement biometric technology for voter registration; the ruling PDG won all but seven seats. Biometric registration was in effect for the 2013 municipal and regional elections, which were overwhelmingly won by the PDG as well.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 4 / 16

The government is dominated by the PDG, which has held power since it was formed in 1968. The country has several opposition parties, but their power is fragmented, and many are spinoffs of the ruling PDG. The FOPA was announced in July 2014. Its ranks include former PDG secretary general Jacques Adiahénot, former foreign minister Ping, and many members of the now-banned National Union Party (NUP). Ping spent nine years as Gabon's foreign minister under Omar Bongo.

There are two other main opposition coalitions, the Union of Forces of Change (UFC) and a splinter group, the Union of Forces for an Alternative (UFA). It is unclear whether the FOPA, the UFC, and the UFA might unite behind a single candidate for the next presidential election, in 2016.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

Investigations by other countries, especially France and the United States, have documented extensive patronage under Omar Bongo's regime. Since taking office, Ali Bongo has attempted to distance himself from his father. He has reduced the size of the presidential cabinet, eliminated ghost workers from the public payroll, formed the National Commission against Illegal Enrichment to combat corruption, and launched an anticorruption probe aimed at finding millions of dollars siphoned off from a decade's worth of development projects during Omar Bongo's reign. However, corruption remains an issue. Gabon ranked 94 out of 175 countries and territories in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index. While the country has one of the highest per capita income levels in Africa, a large minority of the population still lives in poverty.

In January 2014, the government launched an investigation into hundreds of millions of dollars in state funds allegedly stolen during the final years of Omar Bongo's regime. Critics say the probe targeted regime critics, such as former prime minister Jean Eyeghé Ndong. The operation led to the arrest in August of a current minister, Jeannot Kalima, for alleged misappropriation of funds when he was a senior public works official under Omar Bongo.

In February, the government eliminated the quarterly bonus for approximately 10,000 finance-based civil servants, replacing it with a performance-based system for which 30,000 civil servants in all sectors are now eligible.

Gabon was delisted as a candidate for the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) in 2013 because it submitted its validation report after the deadline. In October 2014, the government held a National Workshop to take steps to reenter EITI.

Civil Liberties: 25 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16

Press freedom is guaranteed by law and the constitution. One daily newspaper is government owned and the other is closely affiliated with the ruling party, though there are about two dozen private weeklies and monthlies and half a dozen private radio and television stations. Both private and government-affiliated newspapers and websites criticize the government, but self-censorship is widely practiced. The government's main news regulatory body, the National Communications Council (NCC), can censor and control news outlets with a complaint of "disrupting public order." Reporters convicted of libel and defamation can be imprisoned, though there were no reports of such activity in 2014. There are no government restrictions on internet access or reports of illegal monitoring or surveillance, though less than 10 percent of the population has access. Several Facebook forums express opposition to the government by Gabonese inside the country.

In September 2014, two opposition weekly newspapers, *La Loupe* and *L'Aube*, were shut down temporarily. They had previously claimed that the government had replaced their original publications with bogus issues that included new content favorable to the president. The government denied the allegations.

Gabon is a predominantly Christian country. Religious freedom is enshrined in the constitution and largely upheld by the authorities.

The government does not directly restrict academic freedom.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

The rights of assembly and association are legally guaranteed. Public protests must be approved by the government, and security forces have used harsh tactics to keep order. In July 2014, 30 students staged a hunger strike to protest irregularities of the 2014 baccalaureate exam. This led to the resignation of Education Minister Léon Nzouba, the first minister to leave in the middle of a presidential term since 1996.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) serve as an important counterweight to the lack of an effective political opposition, and are generally free to investigate and report on civil liberties abuses. However, their numbers are small.

Unions are relatively strong and influential, and the private industrial sector is almost entirely unionized. Strikes are frequent, as public impatience with the slow rate of change is growing. In February 2014, customs workers struck in order to force negotiations with the government; fresh produce, pharmaceuticals, and items for the presidency were still allowed entry into the country. Union members are occasionally blacklisted. In December, oil workers went on strike after talks with the government over the reinstatement of some unfairly fired workers broke down.

F. Rule of Law: 6 / 16

The law stipulates that the judiciary be independent, but it is accountable to the Ministry of Justice, through which the president has the power to appoint and dismiss judges.

Prison conditions are harsh and facilities are severely overcrowded. The main prison in Libreville, built to hold 300 inmates, has approximately five times that many. Pretrial detention is often lengthy, sometimes well beyond the six months for misdemeanors and one-year limit for felonies permitted by law. Torture is not specifically outlawed. Legal prohibitions against arbitrary arrest and detention are not always observed.

Ritual killings remain a serious problem that tends to spike in election years because certain body parts are believed to enhance strength. In 2013, a Gabonese senator, Gabriel Eyeghe Ekomie, was arrested after being accused of ordering the murder of a young girl. It was the first time a senior official was detained in such a case. The charges were dropped nine months later, and Ekomie was released from prison.

The country's large population of African immigrants is subject to harassment and extortion, especially during roundups by security forces. Most of Gabon's several thousand members of the indigenous Baka ethnic group live in extreme poverty in remote forest communities, and are often exploited as cheap labor.

Gabon has no specific statute outlawing same-sex sexual activity, but bias against LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people remains an issue. Most members of the LGBT community choose to keep their identities a secret to avoid housing and employment discrimination. There were no reports of violence directed against LGBT members in 2014. In January, six people were arrested and held overnight for allegedly taking part in a marriage ceremony between two men in late December 2013.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

Gabon's ranking in the World Bank's *Doing Business* report fell six places in 2014, to 144 out of 189 countries.

Women hold positions at all levels of private business and the government, including 4 of 29 cabinet positions, 18 of 120 seats in the National Assembly, and 18 of 102 seats in the Senate. However, there is no law against sexual harassment, and rape is rarely prosecuted and is often unreported due to societal taboos. Spousal rape is not mentioned in the law.

Gabon's relatively stable economy makes it attractive for smugglers who want to lure young people into the country, and teenagers from neighboring countries are commonly trafficked into Gabon. Many boys end up as street vendors or mechanics, while girls are forced to work as domestic servants.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)